From *White Teeth* to *Britz*: Multi-Ethnic Britain on British Primetime Television in the 2000s

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This article takes a look at the UK’s politics of ethnicity and its repercussions in television culture after the year 2000. It focuses on fictional programmes aired by the major national channels. What can be observed in such mainstream productions is a significant shift in the representation of multi-ethnic Britain over the course of less than a decade. *White Teeth* (2002), the adaptation of Zadie Smith’s bestselling novel, was offered as a deliberately popular product and seems to have been unaffected by growing resentment against Muslim Asians, even though it was produced and broadcast after 9/11 and the Midlands ‘riots’ of 2001. The spirit in which *White Teeth* was made and presented to its original audience contrasts with the more critical and differentiating stance towards multi-ethnic Britain discernible in primetime productions of subsequent years, such as *Second Generation* (2003) and *Britz* (2007).

1 Multi-Ethnic Britain: Shifts in Representation

The interrelationship between representation, its regulation and the formation of identities has long been an issue of black and Asian British culture and its study. In the course of the 1980s, the struggle against racist misrepresentation and marginalisation, above all in the visible discursive space of film and television, was followed by a new wave of oppositional (self-)representation. It included ‘art’ films of an alternative black and Asian workshop scene as well as more commercially oriented (though still subversive) productions such as Stephen Frears and Hanif Kureishi’s *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1987). In the television sector, Channel 4 (launched in 1982) showed a special commitment to ‘multiculturalism’, financing and providing

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1 See the “circuit of culture” in du Gay et al. (1997: 3).
an outlet for many of the new representations; with a certain delay, the BBC made comparable efforts. In light of such developments, Stuart Hall’s seminal essay “New Ethnicities” (1987) identified a significant “new phase” in the representation of Britain’s migrant communities: “The shift is best thought of in terms of a change from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself.” (Hall 1996: 163) To Hall, films like My Beautiful Laundrette made it “perfectly clear that this shift has been engaged, and that the question of the black subject cannot be represented without reference to the dimensions of class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.” (ibid.: 167) New conceptions of ethnicity and their representation would eventually, as Hall suggested, change the notion of Englishness itself:

We are all [...] ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. But this is also a recognition that this is not an ethnicity which is doomed to survive, as Englishness was, only by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing, and forgetting other ethnicities. This precisely is the politics of ethnicity predicated on difference and diversity. (ibid.: 170)

The following pages take a look at the most recent phase in the UK’s politics of ethnicity and its repercussions in television culture after the year 2000 – a year in which Britain proudly displayed its ethnic and cultural diversity in the Millennium Dome, but also a year soon to be followed by the sobering experiences of 9/11 and related subsequent events. The discussion will focus on fictional programmes aired at prime viewing time (around 9 or 10 pm) by the major national channels, i.e. productions geared at a wide spectrum of television viewers in terms of age, gender, class and ethnicity. What can be observed in such mainstream productions is another significant shift in the representation of multi-ethnic Britain over the course of less than a decade. After a more general look at multi-ethnicity in the British television landscape, a case study of White Teeth, the 2002 adaptation of Zadie Smith’s bestseller of the year 2K, will reveal how this four-part series was offered as a deliberately popular product suited to promote a then still optimistic agenda of multi-ethnicity. The television White Teeth seems to have been quite unaffected by growing resentment against Muslim Asians, even though it was produced and broadcast after 9/11 and the ‘riots’ that had taken place in Bradford and other Midland cities earlier in 2001. The spirit in which White Teeth was made and presented to its original audience con-
trasts with the more critical and differentiating stance towards multi-ethnic Britain discernible in primetime productions of subsequent years.

2 Multi-Ethnic Britain and the Television Mainstream

Even in the age of channel proliferation and the Internet, television remains the most significant medium for reaching a wide cross-section of the public and hence for affecting public opinion. Of course, as Jack Williams (2004: 4) points out in his social history of British television, the actual impact of the medium on people’s opinion is hard to assess: “Within the past three decades, the preponderant view among those working in the growing field of cultural studies has been that not all viewers draw the same meaning from a television programme or television genre.” Nevertheless,

in order to interact with each other the great majority have to draw approximately the same meanings from the same messages. Large numbers may more or less agree on what a television programme means. The fact that over twelve million viewers watch the most popular programmes on most evenings suggests, though certainly does not prove, that many may be deriving the same satisfactions from these programmes and may therefore be understanding them in the same manner. (ibid: 5)

In this light one may claim that television representation – at least in the most popular and mainstream programmes – is also a powerful factor in the cultural regulation of ethnicity and national identity.4 Williams devotes an entire chapter to the issue of “Television, Race and Ethnicity”, observing that “[t]he rise of a multi-ethnic Britain has coincided with the expansion of television” (ibid.: 150).

The history of British television’s engagement with ethnic minorities includes many examples of (in most cases implicit rather than explicit) racism,5 but television has also contributed to a more diversified notion of ethnicity. For the general British audience, which is addressed by mainstream television and which is still predominantly white,6 the representation

4 In “The Centrality of Culture” (1997), Stuart Hall mentions “the relationship of minority cultures to ‘mainstream’” as a manifestation of “the regulation and governance of culture” (Hall 1997: 227). The notion of mainstream in this context implies the integration of cultural diversity within the cultural assumptions and tastes of a majority population, which is, as a result of this infusion, transformed itself.
6 The current UK statistics are based on the census in 2001; in their article on “Ethnicity and Identity” (published on 8 January 2004), the national statistics cite 92.1 per cent of the United Kingdom’s population as ‘white’, 1.2 per cent as ‘mixed’, 4.0 percent as ‘All Asian or Asian British’, and 2.0 per cent as ‘All Black or Black British’. See http://www.statistics.gov.uk/, accessed 4 February 2008. This is not a very high percentage for non-white ethnic groups overall, but black and Asian populations concentrate in, and thus leave a consider-
of black and Asian Britons on the TV screen changed to a considerable extent in the course of the 1990s. Ethnic-minority communities then emerged from ‘special-interest’ programmes and stereotyped appearances in a handful of soaps to become protagonists in quality television produce of the major national broadcasters. Their various channels continued to address past and ongoing frictions in British race relations in current affairs programmes and documentaries, and one of these documentaries, the Windrush series (1998) about Caribbean migration and its long-term consequences, actually became a major success for the BBC. But most of the programmes that became audience-favourites took a humorous approach to the multi-ethnic society. An entertainment factor had long been the mark of Britain’s most popular television produce, and in the 1990s it began to be used as a manner of engaging positively with Britain’s various ethnicities.

Indeed, the first major television event to bring the idea of ‘diverse’ and ‘post-ethnic’ Englishness into British living-rooms featured a conspicuous amount of entertaining elements. The Buddha of Suburbia (broadcast by the BBC in 1993) was a costly four-part drama series based on Hanif Kureishi’s bestselling novel of the same title, which had appeared in 1990. The series received considerable critical attention and several awards, and it also attracted the audience thanks to its comedic approach and despite the fact that it retained much of the subversive ideology, sexual explicitness and meta-representational content of Kureishi’s book.

After the spread of cable and satellite TV in the course of the 1990s, it seems that only soaps and drama series that have “much in common with soaps” still have the capacity to reach big audiences (Williams 2004: 25). This trend was reflected in the representation of ethnic-minority Britain around the year 2000: Asian comedy programmes included Goodness Gracious Me, an award-winning sketch show (BBC 1998), and The Kumars at No. 42 (BBC 2001), a satire focussing on an Indian family that sets up a television studio in their garden to host their own chat-show. In an article.
on Goodness Gracious Me, Mark Lewisohn emphasises its mainstream appeal:

Although the subjects were inspired by the writers’ Anglo-Asian experiences the humour was broad enough to for the comedy to break out from the target area and make waves in the mainstream. There had been precious few previous attempts at Asian comedy, Tandoori Nights […] being about the only dedicated example. Goodness Gracious Me was exceptional, however, in crossing over to a non-Asian audience.\(^{10}\)

For The Kumars, the BBC website likewise highlighted the comedy of the successful show (then in its fifth season): “This was a weird idea from the team behind Goodness Gracious Me but it certainly works, delivering constant laughs and a treasure trove of memorable moments.”\(^{11}\) Babyfather (BBC 2001/2) was a soap about three black men and their attitude toward relationships and family life. The Crouches (BBC 2003), another soap, depicted three generations of a black family living under one roof. Entertainment even infiltrated the documentary mode: Channel 4’s The Great British Asian Invasion, a documentary aired at 9 pm in October 2004, set out to depict the contribution of Asian communities to British society. It was directed specifically at non-Asian segments of the audience in order to counter misconceptions about a monolithically Asian identity. Channel 4’s official programme description did not gloss over the frictions that marked British-Asian relations at the time of the documentary’s first release,\(^{12}\) but it mainly emphasised the programme’s intentionally ‘light’ touch, which goes hand in hand with ascertaining that Asians have become a part of British society:

This film explodes these popular generalisations to tell you everything you wanted to know about your Asian neighbours, but were afraid to ask. It’s an entertaining and irreverent user’s guide to Britain’s Asian communities that reveals how the professions and businesses that are lumped together as Asian are the preserve of a different community, each with a strange tale to tell.

With the aid of archive and personal reminiscences, the film explains the diversity of Britain’s Asians. It reveals how different groups came from different countries at different times, settling in different areas and occupying

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\(^{10}\) Lewisohn’s article was published on the BBC website for Goodness Gracious Me: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/articles/goodnessgracious_66601650.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/articles/goodnessgracious_66601650.shtml) [accessed 15 November 2004].

\(^{11}\) [http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/articles/kumarsatno42the_66602080.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/articles/kumarsatno42the_66602080.shtml) [accessed 15 November 2004].

\(^{12}\) “British Asians are very often regarded as a single community, providing curry, electrical goods and a late-night pint of milk, always available as doctors, lawyers and accountants, playing bangra and playing cricket, and yet increasingly – just maybe – rioting, acting as a dangerous terrorist fifth column in the country’s midst.” [http://www.in4mer.com/programming_c4](http://www.in4mer.com/programming_c4) [accessed 15 November 2004].
different parts of British life, forging new lives and irrevocably changing British society (ibid.).

Although Asians are objectified and exoticised here to a certain extent, this description also still echoes the political rhetoric and cultural regulation that had become fashionable during the early phase of Tony Blair’s government.

In 2000, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain published the *Parekh Report* (Parekh 2000), which called for a radical change in the definition of British identity and the relations between different population groups. A year before, the necessity to redefine Britain’s heritage in terms of ethnic plurality had been acknowledged, during a conference held by the Arts Council of England, by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, who also pointed to the special responsibility of the media in this process: “By recording their contribution and place in British history, we give people their roots, and give their cultures proper recognition and an appropriate stature within and beside the traditional Anglo-Saxon and Celtic cultures.” (Arts Council 1999: 8) A view of Britain as a dynamic, multi-ethnic nation became a trademark of Blair’s ‘Cool Britannia’, and its representation became the vogue in feature film as well as on television.

3 *White Teeth* on Television

This is the dominant political and media climate in which *White Teeth* was commissioned by Channel 4 and broadcast in the autumn season of 2002, once more a piece of expensive multi-part television drama. The majority of reviews for the novel were enthusiastic about this serio-comic family saga by a young Cambridge graduate with a Jamaican mother and white English father: Smith had allegedly written the book for Blair’s Britannia, ingeniously polyvocal and culturally diverse. The novel sold so well that it enjoyed an astonishingly quick television tie-in. The adaptation strove to retain the

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13 Examples include *East Is East* (1999, dir. Damien O’Donnell) and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002, dir. Gurinder Chadha), which were successful at the box office, not only in Britain, but also abroad. *Anita and Me* (2002, dir. Metin Hüseyin) was marketed in their wake as “an hilarious British comedy in the tradition of East Is East and Bend It Like Beckham” (cover of the British DVD release, 2003). *Bride and Prejudice* (2004, dir. Gurinder Chadha) unashamedly capitalises on, and blends, two popular vogues: the one for Jane Austen as English heritage film material, the other for Bollywood spectacle. At the time of release, the film’s promotional material predicted that it was “sure to reach massive crossover appeal with its multi-national casting.”

14 BBC (2004: 16). Apart from the examples already named, one could also cite the updated version of a national classic, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (BBC 2003), which made a special point to integrate ethnic-minority characters, as was specifically emphasised in the BBC’s annual report.

15 *White Teeth* was directed by Julian Jerrold and written by Simon Burke.
novel’s success formula and followed its main plot closely, although it re-
duced its important historical and meta-historical dimensions\textsuperscript{16} to a few short flashbacks. Like the novel, the television *White Teeth* covers the most significant phases and attitudes in Britain’s development toward a multi-
ethnic society since the 1970s: overt and covert racism as well as naïve political correctness, romantic Western misconceptions about the East, the impact of black culture on British youth culture, or the fatwa against Rushdie and other manifestations of Islamic fundamentalism. Above all, however, it conveys an impression of Britain’s diverse society that comes fairly close to the vision expressed in Hall’s “New Ethnicities”: In *White Teeth*, the positive white characters are just as ‘ethnic’ as their black and Asian peers, and only the more doubtful characters still cling to notions of hegemonic Englishness. As projected in *White Teeth*, Britain’s diversity eventually eludes all categorisation, so that notions of ethnic or national identity become blurred and, finally, obsolete.

In episode 1, the action starts in the 1970s, with a focus on Archie Jones, an archetypical Londoner who represents white English ethnicity and, at the same time, may help a predominantly white audience to find their way into the story. On the first day of the year 1975, Archie tries to commit suicide but is saved because his car blocks the way of a halal butcher’s van – a first indication that Archie’s world will soon become transethnic. At a party he meets Clara, his future wife, who came to Britain from Jamaica at the age of seventeen. Around the same time, Archie’s friendship with a Muslim Asian is revived when Samad Iqbal, with whom he fought in World War II, comes to the “bosom of the mother country” from recently independent Bangladesh. Samad intends to start a “whole new life” in Britain, together with his wife Alsana. The Jones’ and the Iqbals later live as close neighbours in the London suburb of Willesden, which is noted for a high percentage of non-
white population. The Jones’ mixed-race daughter is named Irie, the Iqbals’ have twin boys, Millat and Magid. Once the children reach their teens, the adaptation lays a strong emphasis on the experiences of this British-born generation of blacks and Asians and how they define their identity between various ethnicities and in a conflict between generations.

In episode 2, during the 1980s, Samad has still not advanced in society, becomes disillusioned with Britain and re-identifies with Islam. To Samad at this stage of his life, England has become a “godless wasteland”, a space he now regards as diasporic because he perceives himself as a second-class citizen, a migrant who has not been allowed to make his dreams come true. His sons, by contrast, seem well-adapted to life in Britain and untroubled by any sense of “contesting identities” (cf. Brah 1988). Samad, however, de-

\textsuperscript{16} Rupp (2006) discusses the novel in terms of a “memorial culture in transformation” and thus with special attention to its rendering of history.
cides that he has to save them from corruption by sending them ‘back’ to Bangladesh. He intends to ‘re’-connect them with a cultural space which, to them, is a homeland not even in the imaginary sense and which to Samad, who has never been ‘back’ himself, is also only a myth. Eventually, Samad can only raise money to ‘save’ one of his sons, Magid.

In episode 3, by the early 1990s, Irie has fallen in love with Millat, who has become a school rebel, speaks with the Jamaican accent trendy in British youth culture and traffics in drugs. When Millat, Irie and their white schoolmate Joshua Malfen are found with Millat’s marihuana, their punishment consists in A-level revisions in the household of Joshua’s parents. With the Malfens, the story begins to foreground issues of heredity and of ‘Englishness’; the latter is, however, shown to be completely disconnected from any notion of inherited ethnicity or race.

Marcus Malfen is a renowned geneticist, his wife Joyce a horticulturalist, gardening being a stereotypically English concern as well as an activity in which the foundations of modern genetics were laid when Gregor Mendel conducted his experiments with peas in a monastery garden. The Malfens are in love with their culturedness and understand themselves as essentially English. But ironically Marcus Malfen stems from an earlier group of immigrants to Britain: His roots are Eastern-European Jewish – i.e. he originates from the archetypically diasporic community – and his Englishness is merely nurtured, a cultural acquisition. Despite their own family history, the white Malfens treat non-white Irie and Millat as children “from the colonies” for whom they wish to fulfil a mission of education. Joyce also uses Millat as an object for her sexual desires, and Marcus is a sexist who entrusts Irie with secretarial work only, while he shares his scientific interests with men. One of these men is Magid, whom his stay in the East has failed to easternise and who, to his father’s dismay, has returned to his English “home” more English than the English.

Meanwhile, Magid’s genetically identical brother has developed in quite the opposite way. From a bad boy comfortable in British youth culture, Millat turns into a Muslim fundamentalist after having been recruited by a Muslim brotherhood. This organisation is caricatured both in the novel and the adaptation, but fundamentalism is taken seriously in so far as it is shown as a reaction to white racism. The caricature, then, is not to be taken as an anti-Muslim statement but one against fundamentalism. Like the novel, the adaptation lampoons all groups with fundamentalist beliefs and aims, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses of Irie’s grandmother and a militant animal rights group for whom Marcus Malfen, who conducts experiments with mice,

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17 On original homelands as myth see Safran (1991).
18 Their name was actually changed from the novel’s original Chalfen, possibly to give it a more English ring.
is “public enemy number one” but which is joined by his son when the latter falls in love with one of the activists. Even Irie, *White Teeth*’s most sympathetic character, turns essentialist when she develops a desire to seek for her African-Caribbean roots. Such parallels in behaviour between characters that are white, black and brown suggest that being attracted by fundamentalisms is not a Muslim phenomenon, but one to which all kinds of Britons are likely to succumb.

The fourth and final episode brings the climax of the various complications and radicalisms: It unites all protagonists around Marcus Malfen in support of, or resistance against, his FutureMouse project. This is a genetically engineered laboratory mouse devised as a completely pre-determined life form. In revenge for Malfen’s arrogance, Irie provides all organisations with whose principles his project collides with tickets for the public launch of FutureMouse. The plot ends in a hilarious tour de force of surprise discoveries and frantic, unplanned action in the course of which FutureMouse manages to escape and subvert all plans for its future existence. And natural engendering, too, is shown to be indeterminable: Before the launch, Irie has slept with both Millat and Magid and will give birth to another pair of twins with indeterminate fatherhood since the two potential fathers have identical genes. This third generation, with genes that are white, black and Asian, will take the ethnic hybridisation of Britain even further.

What made this story so suitable for becoming mainstream television material? Its potential for entertainment is obvious, in terms both of story and of eccentric but likable characters. The material is visually attractive because it provides an opportunity to revive various fashions of the 1970s to 1990s. It is stylistically vivid because it renders voices of different ethnic and generational groups. And ideologically, *White Teeth* rejects every form of restrictive essentialism and intolerance. Although it is aware of ongoing racism and reasons for young Muslims’ turn to fundamentalist Islam, *White Teeth* suggests a preferred reading that is post-ethnic: It presents a society in which categorisations of ethnicity and race can overlap, blend, be deconstructed – and will eventually cease to matter. *White Teeth* develops an attractive utopian vision about the outcome of “the century of the great immigrant experiment” (Smith 2001: 326), where no one is of pure origin, as Zadie Smith’s character Alsana Iqbal observes, also in the adaptation: “it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy tale.”

In interviews, Smith herself has rejected notions of identity that are determined by distinct ‘roots’ or distinct places of ‘origin’. To Smith, virtual spaces like global television culture and cyberspace build the new communities and identities, and they do so beyond traditional locations and demarcations:
It seems to me the allegiance you once had to your country or to a state or to a town you lived in or even the borough you lived in is now transferred to things like being a Star Trek fan or visiting a certain site on the ‘Net. Those communities seem just as strong as the old binding ones – the religious communities or whatever. (O’Grady 2002: 109)

Smith was hailed as a prophet of hybrid Britishness to such an extent that even her own body was read as a post-ethnic statement. Dominic Head notes that the author’s photo on the paperback edition of her debut novel seems to suggest a vague Asianness rather than emphasising her African-Caribbean background, and he thinks that this is a deliberate self-fashioning rather than a marketing strategy:

Smith now has an Asian look, and this demonstrates an indeterminate ethnicity. For the author of a book that purports to speak authoritatively to a wide range of ethnic experience – including Caribbean British and Asian British experience – the ability to adopt different guises suggests a substantive hybridized identity that goes beyond the more cynical marketing objectives. And what this implies about the author is certainly true of her novel’s scheme: White Teeth […] is artfully constructed as the definitive representation of twentieth-century multiculturalism. (Head 2003: 106)

White Teeth explores, also in its television version, how life cannot be contained in or determined by race, ethnicity, cultural affiliation or history. Archie Jones programmatically defies determination; life happens to him; he throws a coin whenever he has to make decisions. He is thus the counterpart to those characters who try to actively determine fate, like Samad, who sends one of his sons to Bangladesh, the various activist groups, or Marcus Malfen, who manipulates the basic element of life itself. Malfen is the character who most radically tries to eliminate accident from life when he creates FutureMouse, but, like all other determinists and essentialists, he fails. White Teeth promotes an open, permissive position towards life, and one that leaves much scope for identification on the part of a general television audience.

On top of that, the adaptation makes an effort to make a popular novel even more popular. This is particularly obvious in the way it exploits its material’s potential for nostalgia and a fashionable retro appeal, through the clothes, hairstyle and make-up of the characters, a matching style of interiors and exteriors, and especially its use of vintage pop music. In his review in the Guardian, Mark Lawson (2002) specifically noted “the use of Top 40 time markers – T. Rex, Cockney Rebel, Slade and so on” and felt that this occasionally made “the project feel like a soundtrack album that has had a drama based on it.”

The visual and music styles of the television White Teeth are those of a British cultural ‘mainstream’ and thus help to establish its ‘ethnic’ characters
as part of Britain. At the same time, this Britain – or at least its capital – is presented as visibly multi-ethnic from the 1970s onwards, with a white character, Archie, deeply embedded within the ethnic transformation of his country. Archie is the prime vehicle through which multiculturalism is depicted as something not exotic but a natural context at least of a North Londoner’s life. Conflicts between and within the various ethnicities are certainly also shown. However, what influences the characters’ lives to a far greater extent are the factors with which a mainstream audience, whose preferred television fare are soaps and related drama, will be able to empathise: generational and family conflicts, i.e. problems which everybody will have experienced in some form or other, quite independently of their cultural background. The space *White Teeth* portrays on primetime television is an urban, transcultural Britain of the kind politically favoured around the year 2000, and it presents this agenda in a guise of entertainment which attracted a “solid” audience in the 10 pm slot, from 2.2 million for the first episode to 2.42 million for the last episode.\(^{19}\)

A few years later, the *White Teeth* phenomenon is seen with greater caution.\(^{20}\) An article in the *Sunday Times* of 7 February 2008, for instance, cites a critique that finds Smith’s novel far too optimistic: “*White Teeth*, the novel that made Britain feel good about the state of its race relations, has been accused of whitewashing the truth by the real-life model for one of its characters.” (Chittenden 2008) As sketched above, a ‘feel-good’ element is even stronger in the television adaptation. It would be wrong, however, to accuse national primetime television in general of whitewashing Britain’s race relations and cheerleading multi-ethnic Britain. There was more critical television drama in the early 2000s, and for very recent years, one may even diagnose another shift in representation.

### 4 Post-Multiethnic Television?

Only one year after *White Teeth*, Channel 4 broadcast a two-part drama about Asians in London, *Second Generation* (2003). Its plot is inspired by a *King Lear* constellation of fathers on the one, and daughters and sons on the other hand. It presents the conflicts of two elderly Asian men (migrants who have built up a food factory) and their second-generation offspring. Although the young people, who are affluent middle-class, seem to be well-integrated

\(^{19}\) See MediaGuardian for 18 September 2002, which judged the first night audience share as “solid but unspectacular” (http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/media/2002/sep/18/overnights), and BARB’s “Weekly Viewing Summary” for w/e 22/09/2002 (http://www.barb.co.uk/viewingsummary/weekreports).

\(^{20}\) For the wider context of this change, see also the contributions on literature, film and visual art in Eckstein et al. (2008).
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in a London where transculturality has become fashionable and ethnicities appear to mix easily, the film ends with one of the daughters rejecting her white fiancé, falling in love again with her former Asian boyfriend and taking her disturbed father back to India in order to live there with him. This is the stuff of tragedy, where Britain emerges as a diasporic space even for (some of) those Asians who have a birthright to be there. Second Generation anticipated a new problem narrative around (Muslim) Asians on primetime television in the later 2000s, which suggests that the attacks of 7/7 and an increased fear of Islamist terror have not left the regulation of television unaffected.

A report commissioned by the Greater London Authority in late 2007 indicates the degree to which the representation of British Muslims has tended to become ‘negative’ over the past few years. Referring to the print media, it states that “[o]f the 352 articles that referred to Islam and Muslims 91 per cent were judged to be negative in their associations.” (GLA 2007) In her column in the Independent, Yasmin Alibhai Brown accused the BBC of a similar shift in representation, as part of a more general turn to the right and a discontinuation of established quality programmes:

This act of vandalism was followed by an announcement of a season of programmes on the ‘besieged’ white working classes. Nick Griffin of the BNP could well be their consultant. Are migrants going to get their series ‘Scapegoats’? […]

Public-service broadcasters must make uncomfortable programmes on any group or on immigration – and there are excellent examples of responsible, critical journalism. But a whole series propagandising against multiracial Briton [sic]? To validate the race hate that sloshes all over our isles, from playgrounds to football pitches? Some researcher rang to discuss one programme ‘re-appraising’ Enoch Powell. What’s to reappraise? My money is being used to reassure people who hate people like me. This is much worse than mere dumbing down. Belligerence is sought – bring on the alpha right wingers. […] The rabidly anti-immigration Andrew Green of Migrationwatch (mysteriously funded) is their prophet […].

Fashion moves on, the culture is now noisy and intolerant and the Beeb follows, too feeble to stand up for its own integrity. […] And complaints by black and Asian Britons are heeded less than the sounds of birds in the city. (Alibhai Brown 2007)

A tendency toward a more disillusioned and ambivalent assessment of multi-ethnic Britain has also reached Channel 4. Its television drama Britz (2007) was directed by Peter Kosminsky, a filmmaker above suspicion of favouring right ideology.21 Nevertheless, the drama’s plot helps to strengthen the

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21 Kosminsky’s work includes, among others, a critical documentary on The Falklands War: The True Story (1987).
perception of British Muslims as a potentially dangerous social problem, even though one of its Muslim protagonists explicitly joins the fight against terror: Britz is about a brother and sister who are drawn apart by their reactions to the treatment of Muslims in British society. She decides to become a suicide bomber, while he joins MI5 and has to fight his own sibling’s planned act of terrorism.

Such trends in the depiction of Asians in Britain should not be taken as a complete landslide in representational agendas. However, they constitute a significant shift if compared to primetime television in the late 1990s – and in comparison to the dominant manner in which black Britons were represented on mainstream television during 2007. In the context of the Abolition Anniversary, British television joined a popular celebratory note in the presentation of Black Britain and its past, with numerous documentary and dramatic productions focussing on the slave trade and its abolition, including biopics on William Wilberforce and Olaudah Equiano. Such developments suggest a new constellation in the mainstream television regulation of multi-ethnic Britain: Light entertainment no longer seems to be the keynote, at least with regard to British (Muslim) Asians, and celebration has been narrowed to ethnicities dissociated from the terror threat. It remains to be seen how this most recent shift – and split – in representation will develop further, and to which counter-representations it may give rise.

Bibliography


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